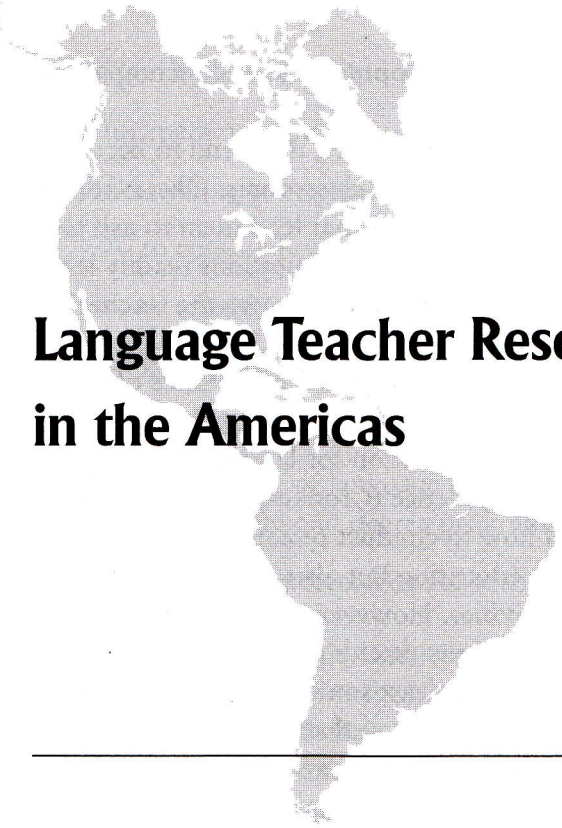

CHAPTER 1

Language Teacher Research in the Americas

Hedy M. McGarrell

Language teacher research is increasingly seen as a means for teachers to reflect on their own teaching, to enhance their professional development, and to contribute actively to the knowledge base on language learning and teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Through a process of critical reflection, teachers embark on a path that enables them to take control over and transform their professional practices. By documenting and describing aspects of their daily classroom experiences, they promote change in the traditionally unidirectional relationship between teaching and research.

However, interest in the relationship between classroom teaching and research develops gradually for many teachers. Initially, their focus is on the day-to-day issues involved in the actual teaching; in other words, they are focused on surviving (Freeman, 1998). Many teachers feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of hours required to prepare and carry out classroom interaction, mark student work, respond to administrative requirements, and do similar tasks. As a result, occasional professional development opportunities such as attending one-day, in-house staff development sessions or external conferences tend to become quests for material that addresses the practical aspects of teaching. In other words, teachers look for how-to sessions or handouts that can be photocopied and used in class. Such practical material promises to make teaching more successful and preparation less time-consuming. But as the new learning becomes absorbed into the teacher's previous experiences, it can quickly fade from memory. Research,

for teachers at this stage, offers information that is optional to and incompatible with their immediate practical needs.

As teachers gain confidence in their classroom practices, they tend to become keen observers of what does or does not work in their classrooms. Observations of their daily teaching environment become reflections that lead them to ask *why* or *how* questions related to their teaching. These kinds of questions readily lead to observing, comparing, analyzing, and valuing, which can move the teacher's practice closer to meeting unmet learner needs.

A major shift in the profession has resulted in widespread acceptance of the need for language teachers to have undergone extensive professional preparation. This shift coincides with an increasing expectation for language teachers to conduct research about their professional practice (Crookes, 1993, 1998; Nunan, 1989). A basic understanding of how to conduct research is viewed not only as an essential component of teacher education but also as an important part of language teachers' professional activities. However, support for language teacher research is varied so far, depending on the teaching context. Some institutions require language teachers to engage in at least some research activities; other institutions simply encourage teacher research; and still others discourage it, either directly or indirectly. This varying support for teacher research may be reflected in the contributions submitted for this volume; most came from language teachers based in or attached to tertiary institutions. No doubt, the culture of research is more visible in university settings than in other teaching contexts such as primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges. As language professionals start to pay more attention to teacher-driven research, its potential to explain and clarify pedagogical issues occurring in language classrooms will become more widely recognized. An additional shift, however, is likely needed to bring about widespread acceptance of language teacher research at all levels of language teaching.

Issues that capture teachers' attention and spur reflection and inquiry tend to depend on their teaching context. Although the teaching environment tends to cultivate many issues suited to reflection, circumstances often act as a barrier to teacher reflection and research. During a short discussion at a conference, I asked teachers to share some of the barriers to inquiry, and we drafted a long list of discouraging situations:

- Large classes.
- Multilevel classes.
- Lack of resources (including textbooks, Internet).
- Lack of teacher training.
- Syllabus development left to classroom teacher.

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- Poor English skills and low self-esteem in students.
- Inexperienced instructors burdened with administrative responsibilities.
- Competing purposes of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction.
  - — to communicate with foreign students in exchange programs
  - — to attend lectures given by international visiting specialists
  - — to pass exams (national, international)
  - — to read journal articles
- Classroom use of language that does not meet academic requirements for undergraduate and degree programs.
- Insufficient opportunities for lifelike examples and practice opportunities.

The contributors to this volume have also encountered many of these situations. Some contributors overcame potential barriers to teacher research, and some addressed these barriers directly in their contributions. In *Language Teacher Research in the Americas*, the authors show how they have moved beyond their day-to-day classroom activities to consider research-oriented questions that help them gain insights into *why* or *how* issues. They have developed skills such as observing, comparing, analyzing, and telling, and they draw on those skills to assume the teacher researcher role. While telling their stories of teacher-driven research, the authors reflect on how the research affected their growth and development as language professionals. Their contributions are arranged in alphabetical order, based on the surname of the first author.

The teaching context of the first contribution, "Understanding Practices: Bridging the Gap Between What Teachers Do and What Students Know," is a university setting in Colombia. Angela Bailey, Lourdes Rey, and Nayibe Rosado report on a study designed to help them understand why many students did not achieve the anticipated TOEFL Institutional Testing Program scores in reading and writing. The three teachers of English reading and writing classes discovered that part of the problem could be attributed to their own teaching. A careful analysis of their teaching practices suggested that including longer texts, explicitly teaching cohesive devices, and focusing more on vocabulary would enhance their classroom practices.

Sandra Burger and Catherine Danforth set up a variation of the peer review process between Danforth's English as a subsequent language (ESL) students and Burger's teachers in training at a Canadian university. In their chapter, "Revisiting Peer Review," the authors describe how the student teachers in Burger's classroom benefited from a learning environment in which they studied peer review and then applied their knowledge to real ESL writing. Danforth's

ESL students, meanwhile, benefited from additional feedback on their texts—feedback from a sympathetic, informed native speaker who was trying to understand the texts without evaluating them.

In "Film in the ESL Classroom: Hearing the Student's Voice," Andy Curtis explores what his university-level ESL students thought about three movies that provided them with language learning opportunities in their Canadian classroom. Curtis wanted to know how helpful his students considered each of the three movies, which led him to develop a basic questionnaire that provided some answers. However, he realizes that he needs to further explore the complex picture that emerges as he adapts his use of film for language learning.

Maria Dantas-Whitney reports on a study she carried out in an intensive English language program at a U.S. university. In "ESL Students as Ethnographers: Examining Academic Interactions," she describes how her students observed, analyzed, and reflected on interactions within the academic context. Their insights helped sensitize them to the communicative practices of the academic community. In her reflections, Dantas-Whitney notes that her curriculum innovation helped her understand how exposure to actual academic interaction prepares students for success when they leave her classroom.

Wendy Fraser and Janna Fox's contribution, "Studying Classroom Practices and Learner Perceptions to Improve Test Quality," stems from their teaching context in a Canadian university. They developed their study to find out why students often showed complex language capabilities in class (in terms of structure or vocabulary) that they did not show in tests outside the classroom. To tackle the problem, the authors experimented with adding tasks in the testing context that encouraged students to engage in reflection.

In Jami Gurkin's teaching context, an elementary ESL classroom in the United States, she questioned whether listening to stories would help her young students learn enough vocabulary to succeed academically. Her contribution, "Listening to Text and ESL Students: Facilitating Low-Frequency Vocabulary Acquisition Incidentally," reports on her efforts to help young learners increase their vocabulary learning opportunities. The positive results increased Gurkin's confidence in her teaching techniques and encouraged her to continue finding ways to facilitate her students' ESL development.

Andrea Jesus, Heliana Mello, and Deise Dutra report on their collaboration to support the use of more communicative techniques in Brazilian classrooms with young English language learners. In "Promoting Innovative Practices Through Reflective Collaboration," they describe how their collaborative sessions helped introduce a more communicative syllabus in two sixth-grade public school classes. Through regular exchanges, the three educators brainstormed and developed innovative classroom teaching practices. Jesus implemented the innovations in her classes and reported on the results so that all group members could learn from the experience. Their reflections indicate that their model of

collaboration can help overcome common barriers to innovative classroom practices and foster a positive and successful learning environment.

In a study based in Jamaica, Mary Hills Kuck describes how speakers of a nonstandard variety of English at the Vocational Training Development Institute in Kingston view the use and purpose of the standard variety. Her study, "Mi and Myself: Dual Identity in Jamaican Contact Language Speakers," draws attention to the intricate interaction between identity and language, especially in the contact of two different varieties of English. In her reflections, Kuck highlights the positive effects her study has had on her own views and her teaching practice as she draws on the local nonstandard variety to teach standard English.

Kathleen McInerney's chapter explores using service learning in the Andean highlands of Ecuador to help preservice teachers understand their language students' culture and thereby enhance teaching practices. In "Local Cultures, Language Politics, and Service Learning in the TEFL Certificate Course," McInerney attempts to heighten the sensitivity of her students to the cultural and political situation of ESL learners. She reflects on how her students in the teaching EFL program might continue to incorporate local culture into classroom materials by drawing on constructivist teaching approaches.

Elizabeth Park's study, "Finding and Leveraging Vocabulary Strengths While Addressing Needs," is set in a U.S. middle school that draws on a student population from a broad range of cultures. Although the students learn to converse relatively quickly in English on everyday topics, Park is concerned with the difficult task her students face in developing broad-based vocabulary. Her study revealed that many of her students are unfamiliar with vocabulary typically considered easy in English: the one-syllable words young children growing up in an English language environment typically learn early on. As a result of her study, Park has developed lessons that address her students' vocabulary needs more directly. She also emphasizes the importance of collecting and analyzing data about students' learning needs.

Eliana Santana-Williamson investigates how native and nonnative adult speakers of English use a limited number of discourse markers and conversational hedges in "Are Nonnative Speakers Really Able to Converse?" For this study, Santana-Williamson analyzed selected segments from *The Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English* (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002). She found that nonnative speakers' use of discourse markers and conversational hedges was limited in comparison to native speakers' use of the same expressions. Based on insights from her study, Santana-Williamson has modified her teaching practice to teach frequent discourse markers and conversational hedges explicitly, based on models from oral rather than written language.

In "Learning How to Learn: Metacognitive Strategy Training With Beginning EFL Students," Sharon Springer describes her exploratory work incorporating strategy training into beginner-level English lessons for her Spanish-speaking

students in Costa Rica. Springer designed her study to find out whether a focus on metacognition would increase strategy use and improve performance in English. She also wanted to be sure the use of Spanish for the strategy training did not hinder students' progress in learning English. Although her results are not conclusive, Springer suggests that the study has encouraged her to use strategy training in future ESL courses.

Overall, this volume shows that language teachers are interested in a broad range of issues that arise in their classrooms. Moreover, they are capable of applying varied research methodologies—qualitative and quantitative—to explore these issues before drawing conclusions to improve learning and teaching. Regardless of the teaching context and geographic location, these authors have shown the capability to investigate aspects of their practice and share the results and reflections for the benefit of their colleagues everywhere.

Hedy M. McGarrell is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at Brock University in Canada. Her research interests include the development of ESL writing skills, technology in the development of writing skills, and language teacher education and development.